

REFLECTIONS OF A SON

by Al Helder

(Written traveling 504 miles an hour toward Iowa and a dying father.)

1983

How vivid the memories are
as they ebb and flow amid tears and smiles.
There he is half dead, or half alive,
depending on perspective.
Memories like snapshots flood in
as I feel for him, or is it for myself? –
Movement of changing generations, owning 40,
for the first time perhaps
as fantasies of innocence and youth fade
and unrealistic parental expectations are laid to rest.

I remember him
from the perspective of a child.
How I admired his strength and energy,
feared his unpredicted reactions,
yearning always for his love,
no price was too great to pay.
This young man just 22 years older than me
held the key to the world,
his coming and going, his projects and cars,
his shared dreams the ultimate investment,
whether wise or foolish, it didn't matter.
He was my dad!
fixer of all that is broken,
Manipulated to easy anger by mother's words,
"wait till your dad comes home."
He is to me, or perhaps to the ever present child inside,
the man who in the silent darkness of my room
dried all tears and
magically banished all fears
with the miracle of his deep hug.
Short tempered? Trying to please too much?
Guilt ridden? Driven? Perhaps,
but these were questions an eight year old never asked.

The stroke leaves this 63 year old paralyzed,
the surgery of this moment leaves little hope.
Already at 18 I was ministering to him,
chuckling at his reactions,
while he "chewed me out" for some sin – real or imagined,
then filling my car with gas in love,
getting me out of a bind,
offering a little grin that needed only

a thanks, a smile, an accomplishment shared.
How disappointed I was in my 20s
to see the feet of clay,
the impotence to act on problems that seemed so clear;
conflicts and pain denied, reality distorted,
forbidden taboos that love rejected even when unavoidable.
As sin carries its own reward
so I became the parent of my parents,
respected beyond wisdom or experience or years,
thrust parentless because parents
needed me to hold on to.

Anger and compassion, acceptance and love
around the edges of resentment created the maturing 30s.
Above it all loving this man
whose weaknesses I knew yet whose love I needed,
taking him home like a son rescued,
offering a place to hide,
consoling yet feeling the agony of his divorce,
patience in healing,
then a new marriage to handle,
celebrating happiness born in companionship and contentment.
Is he alive? Dead? This father of mine,
who is seen clearly to me in the tears of my son.
speaking of learning to ride a bike with grandpa's help,
his tears open my soul to love deeply conceived,
and grief for a man the world will not remember,
no 'Who's Who' his claim to fame
but he is above and beyond all my dad!

Honor they father and mother.
They are not always right,
nor perfect nor even necessarily good
but they are the parents
I wanted you to have.